Daria Rose Foner and Eric Foner

Everywhere and Nowhere
Women at Ellis Island

Situated in New York Harbor, close by the statue of Liberty, Ellis Island once served as the screening station through which millions of immigrants passed on their way to new lives in America. Abandoned by the government in 1954, it was restored and opened to the public in 1990 and today, with over 1.5 million visitors a year, is one of the National Park Service's most popular historical sites. On a rainy December day, together with hundreds of other visitors, we boarded a ferry for the short ride to the island. The sightseers were a cross-section of Americans and foreign tourists, with one notable exception. There were no blacks, a reflection of the fact that Ellis Island celebrates a particular moment in American immigration history of which blacks were not a prominent part.

There is much to praise in the presentation of history at Ellis Island. Together, the exhibits offer a complex, educational, and genuinely moving account of the immigration experience. The introductory film, "Island of Hope, Island of Tears," offers remarkable footage of life in southern and eastern Europe around the turn of the century, as well as an arresting account of the voyage to America. Perhaps most impressive, the curators chose to leave the now restored central hall empty rather than cluttering it with historical presentations. As a result, the visitor receives an almost visceral impression of how imposing, and intimidating, Ellis Island must have seemed when it teemed with immigrants waiting for inspectors to decide whether they could enter the United States.

Off to the sides of the Great Hall, on three floors, are numerous exhibits on the history of immigration. On the main floor, *The Peopling of America* offers three-dimensional graphs charting basic immigration statistics from colonial times to the present. The first encountered by the visitor is a series of male and female figures representing the proportion of men and women immigrants for each period since 1820. Two-thirds during the peak period from 1900 to 1920, we learn, were men; today, two-thirds are women and children. Most immigrants from Europe and Asia are now women, while men predominate among those from Africa and the Middle East. Unfortunately, no effort is made to explain these figures. Unfortunately, too, this is virtually the last time in the entire building where gender is treated as an independent category in relating the history of immigration.

Women are everywhere and nowhere on Ellis Island. A conscious effort has been made to include women among the innumerable photographs and the many recorded reminiscences scattered throughout the exhibits. Yet because immigrants are treated as a generic category, no effort is made to isolate women or to suggest that their experiences may have differed from those of men. In some parts of the museum, this poses few problems. On the second floor, the main exhibit, *Peak Immigration Years*, traces the process of migration and the adaptation to American life from 1880 to 1920. In the section on the passage itself, with its pictures of ships, broadsides advertising, and passports, the failure to deal with gender does not weaken the overall impression. Once the immigrants get to America, however, the neglect of gender is a real problem.

"The exhibits," Daria remarked, "don't treat women as their own thing." Nowhere was this more apparent than in the section, "At Work in America." This includes a small presentation on working women, with photos of textile workers and sweatshops. But the unspoken assumption is that the "normal" immigrant worker was a man. Numerous charts break down immigrant workers in every conceivable way—by the number of native and foreign born workers in different jobs; by job categories for each nationality; by region—but not by gender, either separately or within any of these other categories. It is never mentioned, for example, that "domestic service" loomed so large among Irish employment because of the prevalence of young Irish women house servants.

Daria was very interested in how immigrant children were portrayed. There is a small section on "Child Labor," but she found the very idea too disturbing to look at the vivid photographs. (Her hesitation seemed to be linked to a book she had read in school about the trials of immigrant child workers in the contemporary Southwest.) Less disturbing was another section of the *Peak Immigration Years* exhibit, in which children are presented as "The Go-Betweeners," who negotiated the complex interaction between their parents' old world culture and American society. The idea of children being able to deal more successfully than their parents with American life is an interesting one for a child visitor. But, again, "children" were treated as a genderless category. "Was there a difference between how girls and boys experienced America?" Daria asked. The exhibit did not provide an answer. Nor did it seek to probe the tensions, including gender tensions,

inherent in a situation where children may have exercised more real power in certain realms than their parents. At Ellis Island, the immigrant family is presented as a unit, with no internal conflicts, power relations, or gender inequalities.

Indeed, if one theme predominates in all the exhibits, it is the resilience of the immigrant family. Throughout Ellis Island we are reminded that the family, as the introductory film puts it, was the core of immigrant life. Making the family the centerpiece, however, powerfully shapes how women are presented. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the third floor, in the exhibit, *Treasures from Home*, a loving presentation of items brought from the Old World to the New—photos, embroidered lace, musical instruments, and the like. This was Daria's favorite part of Ellis Island, an understandable reaction to a rich collection of three-dimensional objects after two floors of charts, photos, and broadsides. But to the historian's more critical eye, *Treasures from Home* seemed less appealing. Bathed in the comfortable glow of nostalgia, the immigrant artifacts draw us back to an imagined golden era: not of the Old Country exactly—for we have already learned how desperate life was there and how few actually returned— but to a time when families were large, stable, and coherent; when divorce was unknown; when children obeyed their parent; and when married women remained at home cooking, cleaning, and embroidering.

Like all golden ages, this one has a basis in fact, but exists mainly in the imagination. For romanticizing the immigrant family fails to recognize that it was not only a site of affection and collective survival, but also a battleground. Nowhere on Ellis Island is the possibility considered that the typical immigrant family of the early-20th-century was headed by a domineering patriarch, that many immigrant women and their daughters found Americanization a liberating experience, and that their quest for individual freedom produced tension and conflict with their husbands and parents. In the *Treasures From Home* exhibit, there is a case of artifacts from the Stramesi family, who migrated from Italy to Northampton, Massachusetts. Along with the embroidered towels and pillowcases are two photos of the Stramesi daughters as young women in the 1920s, their hair bobbed and their dresses in flapper style. Visitors are left to wonder how Mr. Stramesi reacted to the Americanization of his daughters.

Among both professional historians and nine-year old girls, it is now almost a cliché that history is experienced differently by men and women and that gender is a useful category of historical analysis. This is not, unfortunately, a lesson visitors will learn at Ellis Island.

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Patricia West

Interpreting Women's History at Male-Focused House Museums

The National Park Service holds a spectacular and largely untapped resource for interpreting the history of American women—the numerous National Park Service (NPS) house museums officially dedicated to chronicling the relationship between the private lives and the public achievements of male forefathers. The fact is that women's history tends to be obscured or underinterpreted in house museums, awash in the biographical details of great men's lives. After all, domestic space, a "woman's sphere," says more about women's private lives than men's public ones. Child care, house-cleaning, cooking, shopping, receiving—are absorbing daily tasks recorded by the material culture of historic houses. People wanting insight into the lives of American patriarchs could use house museums to grasp one of the truisms of women's history—that men's lives, public and private, cannot be fully understood without reference to women, be they mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, servants, or slaves.

There are a number of longstanding reasons why this women's history resource is too infrequently used.[1] One reason is that NPS sites are especially prone to the exclusionary consequence of narrowly-defined interpretive "themes." Partly